



## **RuReSA Award for the Rehabilitation Worker of the Year 2017**

### **Elin Hem Stenersen**

Elin is a physiotherapist from Norway who has been working for the Xhosa community in the Transkei for several years. As student in 2009 she worked at Happy Home in Umtata, a home for severely disabled children. Ever since she has been in and out of the area as a student or volunteer physiotherapist. In November 2014 she decided to come back for a long term period to serve the community she loves so much and that has a big need of her help.

As a volunteer, being supported by her church, friends and family she based down in Canzibe Hospital. She divides her work between the hospital, the clinics, and the homes of her patients. She tries to help the whole region that is covered by Canzibe Hospital, which is population around 140 000 people!

Despite the high workload (Canzibe Hospital has had only one physiotherapy assistant employed during all the time Elin has been volunteering), the tasks that Elin was never taught how to do, and the frustration of working with hospital administration, she will do what is needed for her patients. Her heart lies with neurological disorders as Cerebral Palsy and CVA, but every other patient in need of any kind of rehabilitation she will try to help as well as she can.

Elin took courses to make correct wheelchair assessments and follows through the application process until they are delivered. She even tracks down wrongly delivered wheelchairs and in her small car takes them to the correct house. She will transfer beds through the mud between wards to get the best beds to the patients with the greatest need. She cuts up her own electricity plugs to get the air mattresses working. She pitches up when she is sick to provide crutches in the correct size. She teaches the nurses how to feed a patient properly (by putting them flat on their back and let them experiences the feeding). She asked the speech therapist of Zithulele to come for outreach so she can learn how to help with Speech Therapy. She climbs into beds, getting covered in all kinds of patient products, to get patients moved as much as possible, and will clean up the patient herself if the nurses are nowhere to be found.

Besides the 2 days a week she attends to all the patients in the hospital, she drives around in the region to find every patient that is hidden away but in need of help. In the past years she has identified most of the children with cerebral palsy, and started CP groups. This way she introduced the caregivers to each other while also slowly teaching them and enabling them to take care of their children. Elin will go around with scissors, glue and foam and very precisely adjust the buggy's and wheelchairs to the personal needs of her patients. She drives halfway down the country to collect sponsored material (benches, walking frames, buggies) to get it to the ones who need it the most - those whom the doctors wouldn't have seen if Elin hadn't been seeking them out.

On top of all, she selects a few patients every year to join the Rolling Hills Wheelchair and Buggy race at Madwaleni Hospital, arranging sponsorship for transport and she makes food and goody bags for each child and mother. In this way, she gives them an experience of a lifetime! After caring for her CP patients she won't forget about the stroke patients in the same village. If you go around, don't ask for Elin, because she goes with the name Nosiqhamo. They all will know who Nosiqhamo is for sure.

Because she struggles to get a translator, she even decided to start Xhosa lessons. So in between running around the wards, the homes, the clinics and getting lost in all the governmental rules regarding wheelchair applications she will sit down every week to learn a few words. And although she still feels like a toddler, she can communicate with her patients and they love her for trying so.

Elin has put a lot of effort into improving the numbers of therapists in the Canzibe area, but her requests to the government have failed - but she will not give up!

All above costs a lot of energy, courage, strength and love. I have seen her struggling with governmental rules, getting upset by all the administration, getting disappointed by other health workers and managers, worrying about her car getting stuck in the mud, cry over the difficulties around her visa application, but never, ever, have I seen her give up when she is fighting for the good work.

Without Elin, Nosiqhamo, a lot of our patients would still lie in a dark rondavel unknown by the health system. Without Elin there would not be any kind of rehabilitation for our patients. Without Elin a lot of patients would not be able to take part of their society.

Where the government fails to see the need, fails to provide this community with rehabilitation care, Elin keeps fighting her fight - and enjoys it with every little cell in her body!